

TESTIMONY OF HOMER STAVES
TO THE
MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL
HJ 32
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Good morning. My name is Homer Staves, I am a fifth generation Montanan, I was born in Missoula, grew up in Polson, earned a BA and MBA in Business from the University in Missoula, spent 8 years raising cherries on Flathead Lake and thirty years working for Campgrounds of America in Billings. Since 2000 I have owned Staves Consulting Inc., a Montana corporation specializing in RV parks and campgrounds as well as related recreation throughout North America. I reside in Billings with my wife of fifty years and we spend the summer helping our sons operate the KOA Kampground we own in Whitefish. I currently serve as the President of COAM, the Campground Owner's Association of Montana as well as the President of the Montana – Wyoming KOA Owners Association. I am here to speak to HJ32, the Study of State Parks, Outdoor Recreation, and Heritage Resource Programs.

The Montana Legislature has had a long history of managing outdoor recreation in the state. As early as 1864 they passed laws governing fishing in the state. For much of the history of our state hunting and fishing were the recognized areas of outdoor recreation even though residents spend hours hiking picnicking and enjoying our beautiful scenery. In 1929 the Legislature authorized the Land Board to set aside land for parks and in 1936 the Lewis and Clark Caverns became the first Montana State Park. In 1939 the Legislature created a state park system with a separate commission and in 1953, state parks were transferred to the control of the Montana Highway Commission. In 1965 the United States Congress passed legislation creating the Land and Water Conservation Fund or LWCF. The enacted act stated the purpose of the LWCF was, "to help preserve, develop, and assure access to outdoor recreation facilities to strengthen the health of U.S. citizens." It was touted as a method to provide money to both the federal land agencies for land acquisition and to the states for outdoor recreation. Because of this expected flow of new money from the Federal Government the 1965 Legislature moved control of the Montana park system from the Highway Commission to the Montana Fish and Game Commission. They also created the Governor's Outdoor Recreation Advisory and Planning Committee but provided no operating guidelines. At a November 1965 meeting of the Fish and Game Commission, the Chairman of the Commission, Walt Staves, my father, told the committee, "the committee shouldn't ask the Fish and Game Commission for advice on what to do but rather it should advise the Commission."

In spite of the intentions of the Congress in 1965, over the years the money appropriated for the states has historically only been about 25% of the total appropriation which in turn has been considerably less than the total fees collected from the original designated sources. Even with that shortfall, the Montana Parks Department has performed a great service for the residents of our state.

When I was growing up, the house was where you went to eat and sleep. With the exception of a heavy rain fall or blizzard, you went outside to play. Everyone from the age of 8 to 80 preferred to be outside and only wanted the parks department to provide places where they could go. Today everything has changed. It is all a parent can do to get their children to go outside and leave their I-Pod, TV, computer or Gameboy for an hour or two. A recent book titled, "Last Child in the Woods, saving our children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" was written by Richard Louv. This book has become almost a bible to those of us who work in outdoor recreation and I highly recommend it. In this book Mr. Louv points builds a very strong case for the need to restructure outdoor recreation in order to make it attractive to today's youth. He points out that the outdoors is the best remedy for things like attention deficit syndrome and childhood obesity. This is the challenge facing all of us today. How do we make the outdoors appealing to today's youth?

In addition to the health issue, the property owned by federal and state governments also has to serve an economic purpose in order to improve the economy and create jobs. Much of the federal and state owned property in Montana is used for agricultural grazing and or mineral recovery. Agriculture and mining have long been considered the major industries in our state. Tourism however has been one of the top three economic engines for the state and in many ways provides more jobs and more new net revenue coming from out of state. The two National Parks, Yellowstone and Glacier, are key attractions to get people to come to Montana but once they are here it is the natural beauty and historical attractions that keep people in the state for a longer period of time. This is the area where state owned property regardless of how it is classified, can help grow both the economy and jobs within the state. A couple of years ago I was part of a team from PricewaterhouseCoopers hired by the state of Kentucky to analyze their state parks in order to increase their profitability and usage. In Kentucky the state parks contain RV parks, hotels, lodges, cabins, restaurants, marinas, historical sites, museums, horse trails, water parks, golf courses and gift shops. The parks department is part of the Commerce Department and they see their mission as building tourism in the state as well as making a profit while not directly competing unfairly with businesses in the private sector. The main negative with their organization is most of the management of the system are political appointees of the Governor and when there is a change in parties the top three layers of managers are replaced. In Montana we have only scratched the surface of the potential to utilize the state owned parks, historical places and museums to help grow the entire tourism industry. Research by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research indicates that the typical out of state tourist to Montana spends close to \$200.00 each day in Montana. We need to do a better job of using Montana's parks and attractions to keep tourists a few days longer in the state. This can best be done with a new type of organizational structure utilizing Montana residents as advisors to help state employees determine the most effective way to increase revenue and jobs for the state while still preserving and protecting our historical and natural resources.

In many ways the Montana Environmental Quality Council has been given the same charge that the 1964 legislature gave to the Governor's Outdoor Recreation Advisory and Planning Committee. That committee was never able to even determine what they were supposed to accomplish. This Council can make a difference and I

think it is time to recommend a bold new approach combining many of the elements of today's outdoor recreation under one umbrella. It does not make any difference if a child spends a day visiting historical attractions like Virginia City, Nevada City or Bannack. The same family can benefit from camping at any one of the state owned campgrounds or a private park like my KOA Kampground in Whitefish. They might also look for a place to go snowmobiling or take off on some type of off road vehicle. Their getaway could be a hike in the mountains in the west or rock hounding in eastern Montana. Today's family really doesn't care whether a facility is owned by the State, the Federal Government or a private company. They are more concerned with the quality of the experience. All of us in the outdoor recreation industry share the same customers. I even have campers at my park who camped the previous night at a Wal-Mart parking lot. We all need to work together to make sure the visitor to our state as well as the resident has a good experience wherever they go and whatever they choose to do.

The present Fish Wildlife and Park Commission have their hands full with wolves, bison, and endangered species and have limited time and experience with the operation and needs of the Parks Division. These problems did not exist for the eight years my father served on the Commission, three of which he was the Chairman. He really thought moving the state parks into the Fish and Game was a great idea. When they created that organizational plan there were no off road vehicles or snowmobiles to worry about. There were no regulations for watercraft and most of the trails for hiking had been created by either wild animals or the Civil Conservation Corps. If Dad was still alive today, I know he would agree that the time has come to try a new organizational plan that better meets the needs of today's residents and out of state visitors. We need an organization that will improve the outdoor experiences and a plan that moves children from the TV to the Great Outdoors, be it parks, historical places like Virginia City, private and public campgrounds or other outdoor activities.

I totally support the proposal made by the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department. I think this approach will greatly enhance the opportunity for meaningful partnerships between state and federal government agencies as well as the private sector and the general public. This improved cooperation will result in more jobs in the state, higher tourist revenues, and a better experience for resident and nonresident alike. It should also increase the percentage of operating fees paid by users for both the state parks and the Heritage properties thereby reducing the amount of tax funds needed to maintain all of the facilities. All of this can be accomplished without creating any new Departments in our state government and with no additional state employees.